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**OPERATION MERKUR 1941
A FAILURE IN STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP**

BY

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ABSTRACT

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Operation MERKUR, the battle for Crete in May 1941, has been characterized by some as a “gory sacrifice” of German paratroops. In retrospect, it has been woven into a network of taboos and legends, in particular, the question as to whether large scale airborne operations could be used in future conflicts.¹ Even though the operation was ultimately successful, the high toll of lives raises many questions. What was the point for making such sacrifices? What lessons can be drawn from the historical events to help shape both the present and future? It is not the writer's intent to recapitulate the entire course of the battle. Rather, this paper will place the decision-making process that led to Operation MERKUR within the politico-military and strategic-operational context of that time. Viewed in such a way, the battle of Crete can serve as a lesson for failures in strategic leadership in the implementation of national strategy.

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OPERATION MERKUR 1941 – A FAILURE IN STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

INTRODUCTION

Operation MERKUR, the seizure of the island of Crete by German paratroops in May 1941, is one of the most controversial German military operations in the early stages of World War II. The opinions of commentators range from an outstanding military effort by the German troops to a strategically irrelevant operation that caused the delay of the campaign against Russia. Most of the battle reports show that the individual German paratrooper demonstrated outstanding skills and morale.²

It is difficult, however, to identify the strategic environment and to understand the reasons that led to the decision for Operation MERKUR.³ The possible rationale given for launching this operation ranges from MERKUR being the capstone of Balkan operations, to the need for establishing a base from which to combat British influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Some have even suggested that MERKUR was scheduled to employ the most recently established XI. Fliegerkorps in a major operation.⁴

Although Operation MERKUR was successfully completed, the losses on the German side were severe enough to impact on the German airborne troopers and the air transport capacity.⁵ It was close to a "Pyrrhic-victory". After Crete there were no further German large scale airborne operations and the top German leadership lost their confidence in the capabilities of the airborne troops. Hence, Operation MERKUR is widely regarded as the climax or culminating point in the history of German paratrooper operations in World War II.

This paper is designed to provide a closer look into the strategic situation and the decision making process that led to Operation MERKUR. The operation itself is the subject of a number of books and articles.⁶ In this paper the operation itself will only be addressed with regard to its results and its impact on the strategic situation.

The unique opportunity to do this research at the U.S. Army Military History Institute, with original documents, was a pleasure but an additional challenge. The support by the Airborne School at Schongau-Altenstadt was outstanding.

THE LEADERSHIP

In early 1938, Hitler relieved Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg, the Commander in Chief of the German Armed Forces, and General Werner von Fritsch, the Commander in Chief of the Army. Hitler assumed both commands, thus unifying in one person the whole politico-strategic-military decision hierarchy down to the Office of Commander-in-Chief of the Army.⁷ With that, Hitler decided each and every operational detail of German military operations. His leadership, however, was compromised by the leadership of the Navy and the Air-force, each going their own way. This was possible because the position of Chief of the General Staff for all three services of the armed forces was not established. Hence, there was no coordination of politico-military and strategic-operational decisions and activities, or any real strategic planning.

At first these problems were not obvious. Following the successful "Blitzkrieg" against Poland and France, Hitler was called the "greatest commander of all times" by a number of officials including the High Command of the Wehrmacht and the Army.⁸ Hitler saw himself as a "Ludendorff of his own" and the Army general staff as a mere operations center to implement his decisions.⁹ Therefore, in many cases, Hitler reserved for himself the right to make final decisions on military operations. Thus, the leadership of the armed forces was left in the dark, causing them to lose critical time in the planning and preparation of operations. The effects of this kind of leadership are clearly evident in Operation MERKUR.

THE NATIONAL STRATEGY

After the defeat of France in the summer of 1940, Hitler's aim was to negotiate a peace with Great Britain. A diplomatic-political attempt to accomplish this had failed on the first days of July 1940. This failure was mostly related to the fact, that Hitler had missed the chance to complete the encirclement of the British Expeditionary Force and major elements of the French Army at Dunkirk.¹⁰ If Dunkirk had been a German victory, Great Britain would not have had a professional army available. The defense of the island would have been solely incumbent upon reservists, called up on short notice. For inexplicable reasons, Hitler let this chance slip from his

hands. Had a different decision been made, the capture of a large number of British professional soldiers might have increased Churchill's willingness to enter into negotiations and to yield to Hitler's main political demand, i.e. the recognition of German hegemony on the European continent. Even if the British Government, despite the pressure of the circumstances, had not been ready for compromise, the invasion of England would have had a greater chance of success.

In late summer of 1940, when it became apparent that the Royal Air Force (RAF) had not been neutralized, the Chief of the Wehrmachtsfuehrungsstab (Armed Forces Operations Staff) General Alfred Jodl submitted to Hitler a "Denkschrift" (think piece) addressing his estimate of the situation as cleared by the Chief of the OKW (High Command of the Armed Forces) Feldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel.¹¹ In his think piece he stated that the invasion of England, under the given circumstances, would be an enormous risk. In case of a failure it would harm the current favorable military and political situation of Germany and hamper the possibility for reaching an agreement with England. Therefore, Jodl proposed a different approach to bring England to its knees; drive the British from the Mediterranean. To do this, he anticipated a combined operation with Italy and the possible support of France and Spain. He saw Gibraltar as the first objective.

Hitler acknowledged Jodl's thoughts and, for a variety of reasons, stalled preparations for the invasion of England. He kept up, however, the appearance of invasion preparations.¹² Hitler was not fully convinced about the plan to bring England down through military action in the Mediterranean. He was already considering an attack on Russia. A campaign against Russia was for him more important because it would serve his long term goal which was to gain "Lebensraum" (living space) in the East. As a side effect, he considered this as an opportunity to have an impact on Russia as England's ally and "Festlandsdegen" ("continental rapier").¹³ Therefore, Operation FRITZ, later renamed Operation BARBAROSSA took all of Hitler's attention.

In order to secure the right flank of the deployment for BARBAROSSA, a German position would have to be established in the Balkans without having a major military confrontation.¹⁴ This action would have to be taken because the most important factor in the Balkans, according to Hitler, was Russia. This nation was seeking to gain influence in Bulgaria.

Hitler anticipated that every sign of weakness at any place in Europe would lead to an advance by Russia. By this time Romania was already under German control.¹⁵

Hitler regarded a German intervention in Greece as necessary to clear the situation in the Balkans. As long as Greece did not end its conflict with Italy and force England to leave its Greek bases, Greece was a problem. However, he did not allocate any role to this area in the final decision about European hegemony.¹⁶

As a result, the initial deployment in the Balkans was seen as an important requirement. Even if the execution of the operation should be overcome by events, any deployment would serve as a part of the operation against Russia.¹⁷ Italian operations, for the time being, would be assisted by the German air force through their attacks on the British fleet in the Mediterranean using bases in Sicily and South Italy. The Italians would also be assisted through the seizure of Gibraltar.¹⁸

In early December 1940, Hitler provided his guidance for operations in the Mediterranean. An air campaign against the British fleet in the eastern Mediterranean would start December 15, the seizure of Gibraltar would be scheduled for early February 1941, and the intervention against Greece would be scheduled for early March.¹⁹ Crete was not addressed in Hitler's initial plan. Since he anticipated the campaign would not last longer than four weeks, Hitler intended to have all forces required for an attack on Russia available by May 1941. With this in mind, Hitler ordered his staff to complete the planning for Operation FELIX (Gibraltar), Operation MARITA (Balkans), and the Operation BARBAROSSA (Russia).

THE DECISION FOR CRETE

In August and September 1940, Germany believed that the British were focusing their interest on the Western Mediterranean.²⁰ Italy was seen as dominating all approaches to the Eastern Mediterranean.²¹ Hitler requested that more attention should be given to Gibraltar and Egypt.²² The situation in the Mediterranean did receive more attention but not as Hitler has hoped. On September 18, 1940, Italy started its offensive against British forces in Egypt.²³ The offensive quickly stalled. In the early days of October 1940, a meeting between Hitler and Mussolini was held to clear up the situation and to plan for further operations in the Mediterranean.²⁴

On October 24, 1940, at a situation conference of the Armed Forces Operations Staff, the air force representative briefed an item that was to upset German planning in the Mediterranean. He noted the possible British interest in establishing a base on Crete for use by its air force for employment against Romanian oilfields.²⁵ It was noted, however, that the existing airfields would only accommodate one 'Kampfgruppe' (bombardment group). On October 26, the navy representative recommended the capture of Crete in the course of the Balkan campaign, due to its importance. Why the navy regarded it so important was not clarified.²⁶ With these briefings by two branches of the service, military action in Crete had become more important.²⁷

This interest in Crete might have been stimulated by rumors of a possible Italian attack on Greece. Hitler was not in favor of any Italian action against Greece. He made his position known to Italy, and his intention to undertake all necessary measures, which would reduce the importance of the Greek mainland for use by the Allies. This included consideration of seizing possible bases on the approaches to Greece, including Crete. This island could then serve as an important German base for the maritime and air campaign to protect the European southeastern flank.²⁸

On October 28, 1940, Italy invaded Greece without any coordination of its actions with Germany.²⁹ England immediately assured Greece of its assistance and on November 4, 1940, British troops landed on Crete.³⁰ On November 6, 1940, Churchill announced the establishment of airbases and port-facilities at Crete.

By the end of December 1940, the situation for Italy was rapidly deteriorating in North-Africa, Albania and Greece.³¹ Italy approached Germany for assistance in both theaters. In the Mediterranean, the situation became even worse after Italy lost the Libyan cities of Bardia and Tobruk.³² On January 9, 1941 Hitler decided to send an interdiction force to Libya in support of the Italian forces. They were not to deploy before February 20.³³ Hitler was more cautious about sending German forces to Albania. If such a deployment were to take place, Hitler considered committing a strong force which could open any Greek defensive lines.³⁴ He did not commit forces; only agreed to make preparations.

On January 11, 1941, directive Nr. 22 was released, covering the German assistance in the Mediterranean.³⁵ The engagement of an interdiction force in Libya was code named

Operation SONNENBLUME. The provisioning of forces for Albania was called Operation ALPENVEILCHEN.³⁶ At the same time, the Balkan campaign (Operation MARITA) was still in the planning phases. On January 18, 1941, Hitler underlined his earlier intention to seize the most important Greek islands through airborne operations. He tasked the air force command for further planning, which was already under way, for the seizure of Lemnos.³⁷

Hitler presented his thoughts and opinions on the overall situation to Mussolini on January 20, 1941.³⁸ Hitler stated that Germany should pursue several goals with the deployment of German forces in the Balkans. First, through an operation against Greece it would assist Italy. Second such a deployment would protect Bulgaria against Russia and Turkey. Finally, German presence would help guarantee Romania's security. Of particular concern was the capability of Allied aircraft to reach the Romanian oil fields from both, the Mediterranean and Russia.³⁹

Given the importance of securing Germany's southern flank, no enemy actions were to be provoked. Therefore, Hitler would not agree to send troops to Albania in support of Italy. With appropriate assurances, he expected Turkey to remain neutral and not to offer assistance to England.⁴⁰ He also wanted to take Gibraltar. Therefore, he hoped that Italy would convince the Spanish ruler, Francisco Franco, to join the war. He could not risk any failures in an attack against English interests.

On January 30, 1941, Hitler signed the directive for Operation MARITA, an invasion of the Balkans.⁴¹ Hitler was briefed about Operation BARBAROSSA and Operation SONNENBLUME on February 3, 1941.⁴² He again voiced his opinion that Turkey would not get involved in these military operations. If they stayed out of operations special security measures would not be necessary for the Balkans. He was more concerned that if England conquered Libya, it would allow them to be employ forces against and in Syria.⁴³

On this occasion Hitler explained his thoughts on the situation in the Mediterranean.⁴⁴ His foremost goal was to prevent Italy from being defeated. This would be achieved by Operation MARITA. Moreover, the Italians would need support in North Africa which he thought could be achieved by air strikes on North Africa and on Malta, and the deployment of a blocking force in Libya. For the latter operation, the order for SONNENBLUME was signed on February 6, 1941.⁴⁵

In order to prevent any immediate threat to Italian troops in Libya, as well as to counter balance English forces in the Mediterranean, the staff was tasked on February 8, 1941, to provisionally develop plans for the seizure of new bases in the Mediterranean.⁴⁶ The planning was to include Malta, Corsica, and the French coastline. Any possible campaign was to take into account possible options for airborne operations by the newly formed XI. Fliegerkorps.⁴⁷

Of greater concern was Italy's situation in North Africa. Hence, on February 15, 1941, in a meeting of the Armed Forces Operations Staff the seizure of the Southern French coast, Corsica and Malta was regarded as necessary precondition to stabilize the situation in the Mediterranean.⁴⁸ Again, the employment of air borne forces was considered as essential for the seizure of Malta.

At a situation briefing on February 14, 1941, the air force raised the possibility of English air strikes on Bulgaria and Romania; Crete would serve as the main base for the British air force.⁴⁹ There were however, no reports of any actual air strikes launched from Crete against Romanian oil fields.

On March 4, 1941, at a regular OKW situation conference, the Air Force representative explained the original operational goal to seize, with the exception of Crete, all islands in the Aegean. Through the discussions, the only issue agreed upon was the seizure of the island of Lemnos, as proposed by the Army. This, however, would offer no operational advantage, either for the Air Force or for the Navy.⁵⁰ Additionally, the seizure of Lemnos could create difficulties with Turkey, due to its proximity to the Turkish main land. Air-borne troops would be available for this task if the situation development required it. An airborne operation was also considered for the seizure of Corsica (Operation KAMELIE).⁵¹

In the discussions concerning whether the seizure of Lemnos should be pursued, it became obvious that the objectives of Operation MARITA were not clear, in particular, how far the occupation of Greece should extend.⁵² Work on the operations order continued, but the execution would be on order, and not before the offensive against Greece.⁵³ In addition, and as a follow-up to the occupation of the Greek main land, plans for the quick seizure of the Cyclades were to be prepared and executed on order. All of this was dependent on the general situation developing in the Aegean Sea.⁵⁴

On March 18, 1941, Hitler further clarified that Operation MARITA should have as an objective the removal of all British troops from the Greek main land and the Peloponnes. The intent was to seize two islands, Thasos and Samothraki, without employing air borne troops. The operational approach for the seizure of Lemnos and the Cyclades would remain unchanged.⁵⁵ OKW issued its guidance, on March 16, 1941, for the seizure of Lemnos to include the employment of one reinforced paratroop regiment.⁵⁶ Due to this employment and the lack of air field infrastructure necessary to bring in reinforcements, the Cyclades islands would not see airborne troops deployed.⁵⁷

In Mid April 1941, General Alexander Loehr (Commander of Luftflotte 4 in the Balkans) proposed the invasion of Crete to Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering. He in turn approached Hitler with this proposal. To Hitler it was obvious that his limited airborne forces could be employed either to invade Malta or Crete, but not both. Therefore, the question was whether Malta or Crete was more significant in supporting British operations in the Mediterranean.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the question remained whether the North-African campaign and its logistical support would be of a decisive nature, or if the focus should be on the Balkan operation. Hitler required that if any operation in the Mediterranean were launched, it had to be completed prior to Operation BARBAROSSA, the invasion of Russia. Hitler, however, postponed a final decision on an invasion of Crete and Malta and ordered the Airforce to prepare the destruction of Malta by air attacks only.

A short time later (21 April 1941) Goering chaired a situation conference with General Keitel, Chief of the OKW, General Jodl, Chief of the Operations Staff of the Armed Forces, General Jeschonnek, Chief of Staff of the Air Force and General Student in attendance. Keitel and Jodl were in favor of an invasion of Malta, which they considered to be a vital base for the navy in the Mediterranean. Goering and Student, who appeared to be fixed to a large degree on the eastern Mediterranean area, preferred the seizure of Crete as a "stepping stone" to the Suez Canal.⁵⁹ On this occasion, Student discussed the discontent, which spread among the parachutists, nourished by a "growing disappointment [...] to be doomed to inactivity, while the comrades in Greece dash from victory to victory".⁶⁰

A preliminary decision for the invasion of Crete was made directly after the situation conference at a meeting with Hitler.⁶¹ On April 25, 1941, Hitler released Directive No. 28 for

Operation MERKUR. The objective for the occupation of Crete was given as establishing a base for the air campaign against England in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶² In its essential part, the directive expressly stipulated that MERKUR must not delay staging operations or in any way jeopardize BARBAROSSA. This constant bickering and indecision inherent in military decision making is characterized by Hitler's claim: "It is my prerogative to give the order for the execution".

Eventually, the strategic rationale for invading Crete receded into the background. The elimination of a threat to the Rumanian oil fields, the seizure of a "stepping stone" to Suez, and the concerns about the repercussions on the position of neutral Turkey faded. By mid April 1941, Student had managed to get an audience with his chain of command (Loehr, Goering and Hitler). He told them that the victorious campaign in Greece must not be halted on the Peloponnesus and that Crete should be conquered.⁶³ Finally, Hitler tersely concluded: "The conquest of Crete would fit nicely to settle the campaign in Greece".⁶⁴

Although the preparations for this operation were made with high operational security measures, England acquired knowledge of the operation on May 12. A particular indicator for the Allies may have been the order, on April 26, 1941, for the 7th Flieger Division to take the bridge which crosses the Isthmus of Corinth with an airborne operation.⁶⁵ On May 15, Churchill publicly announced the British intent to defend Crete.⁶⁶

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF CRETE

The strategic importance of Crete was rated high by Goering and Student. General Franz Halder thought it important as did the Navy. In their opinions, the possession of Crete by the British forces would allow the British to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean. It could also serve as a jumping off point for landings on the Balkan coast and serve as a base for air attacks against Romanian oil fields.

Therefore, the German possession of Crete was seen as necessary to block potential British threats. German possession of Crete would permit control of the Greek mainland and the Aegaeis, would help provide air support to the campaign in North Africa, and support the attack on Egypt and the Suez Canal.⁶⁷ This estimate would have been appropriate, if Hitler's forces were already on the Mediterranean, poised for additional military action.

There was a basic problem with this estimate of Crete's strategic importance. Military plans did not reflect available capabilities. If these capabilities would have been taken into account, it would have been obvious, that neither the disruption of British sea lines in the Mediterranean, running from Gibraltar to Egypt, nor the annihilation of the threat to the German support lines from Italy to North Africa stemming from Malta, could have been achieved from Crete.⁶⁸ To this day, an anticipated threat to the Rumanian oil fields of Ploesti by RAF bombers, stationed on Crete, remains the main argument for the strategic importance of Crete.⁶⁹ This assumption has been allowed to take the character of a justification for the losses and thus requires verification.

On November 1, 1940, a few largely obsolete RAF aircraft, under the command of a Lieutenant, landed on Crete.⁷⁰ The small airfields in the vicinity of Maleme, Heraklion and Rethymnon were unsuitable as bases for long-range bombers because they were lacking both the required infrastructure and ground support. They were not improved, even when the British occupied the island subsequent to the evacuation of their troops from Greece. Due to the air superiority, which the Germans had achieved in their campaigns in the Balkans and in Greece, RAF aircraft were withdrawn to Egypt a day prior to the German attack. Notwithstanding these factors, it is extremely doubtful that the British would have stationed major bomber formations on Crete.

The distance from Crete to Ploesti is 1,100 km. The range of British "Wellington" bombers would have permitted an attack on Ploesti. However, the bomber formations would have been forced to over fly the Greek islands and Greek mainland, which was occupied by the German Armed Forces and where major elements of the 4th Air Force were stationed. This would have exposed them to attacks by German fighter formations. Moreover, the chain of the Dodecanese islands, occupied by the Italians, and the sovereign territory of neutral Turkey would have to be taken into consideration by the British formations en route.⁷¹ All this would have presented extra dangers, detours and channeling of flight routes.

More importantly, the bomber formations would have had to operate without the crucial support of fighter escorts in the target area. The RAF "Hurricane" fighters did not possess the appropriate range to escort bomber formations. Without fighter escort RAF bomber aircraft would have been extremely vulnerable to attacks of local German fighter aircraft as well as air

defense batteries. Following the example of British air defenses during the "Battle of Britain", these were extensively positioned on the periphery of the Ploesti oil wells.

Another significant factor made British air attacks unlikely. In the air battle over Britain, the RAF had suffered great losses and at this stage in the war still had to defend against German air attacks. At the same time, in mid 1941, the Allied forces in North Africa were in an extremely critical situation. All available RAF formations were urgently needed to preclude the advance of the Africa Corps to Suez and to secure the British positions in the Middle East. Simply stated, the British did not have sufficient forces to wage an air campaign from Crete. Besides, a threat to the Rumanian oil wells already existed through British bombers departing from Malta or Cyprus.⁷² Since there were already bases on these two islands, the development of a specific air force infrastructure would not have been required.

Under these conditions and in view of an overall cautious, risk-avoiding Allied conduct of the war, it appears unrealistic to think the Allies would weaken the worn RAF assets by another dispersal, thereby further increasing their vulnerability. This was in line with Churchill's principle that he who tries to be safe everywhere will certainly nowhere be strong. This principle suggests, that Great Britain, using a cost-benefit approach, would have refrained from stationing Allied bomber formations on Crete for the sole purpose of employing them against the Rumanian oil wells. This argument is further supported by the fact that Great Britain never planned a re-occupation of Crete after regaining possession of northeastern Libya.

Neither in the geo-strategic nor politico-military calculations of Winston Churchill, did Crete play an initial role as an outpost for Egypt.⁷³ Only when Italy's intervention on the Balkans and in Greece commenced, and subsequently when the Allied forces in Greece were defeated in April 1941, did Crete enter Churchill's political and military scheme of thought. Initially, the island served only as a catch basin for retreating forces during the evacuation of Allied forces from Greece to Egypt.

In political terms, once Allied forces were withdrawn from the European mainland, something was required to boost British morale and prestige, both in Britain and among its Allies. When all indications pointed to a major air landing to attack Crete, Churchill grasped the opportunity to draw political benefit from a victory over a legendary force, German paratroops, which had achieved such spectacular successes as the spearhead of the German Army in the

campaign in the West. Churchill, in his April 28 radio telegram to the Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, General Lord Wavell, the Naval Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, Admiral Cunningham (May 1) and the Prime Minister of New Zealand (May 3), stated that a savage and stiff defense of Crete would be a good chance "for killing" German paratroopers. "Of course", a victory would influence "the overall global situation".⁷⁴

Thus, Churchill's subsequent orders for the defense of Crete were not so much the result of a geo-strategic but of a politico-psychological perception. These orders should be seen in the context of his message to the British people on May 13, 1940, in which he sketched Britain's future to be "blood, toil, tears and sweat" and his irrevocable objective: "Victory — victory at any costs, because without victory there is no survival".⁷⁵

THE PLANNING FOR MERKUR

After long hesitation and with his attention absorbed by the preparations for the assault on the Soviet Union, Hitler finally decided, April 25, 1941, to issue Directive No. 28 for Operation MERKUR.⁷⁶ The execution date was to be in the middle of May. The time lost between January 25 (meeting held at Hitler's mountain retreat near Berchtesgaden) and April 25, meant that the time available for planning and preparation, deployment and assembly of forces, provision for transportation and supplies and coordination among the various command authorities, was reduced to less than a month.

Hitler designated Goering as the one to be responsible for the execution of Operation MERKUR. Goering in turn transferred overall responsibility to the commander of 4th Luftflotte, Generaloberst Alexander Loehr. In turn, Loehr delegated the task of planning the mission to the commanding general of XI. Fliegerkorps, General Student.

The assault was scheduled to begin on May 20. Thus, the operational-tactical decision-making process, required to develop an operations plan that considered all parameters and relevant factors, was seriously impeded by time limitations. This lack of time would inevitably result in 'frictional losses', shortcomings, and highly detrimental pressures to execute, rather than plan. Obviously, the leadership of XI. Fliegerkorps was not responsible for the limited planning time.

Hitler's direction not to delay Operation BARBAROSSA in any way, confronted 4th Luftflotte, and VIII. Fliegerkorps in particular. They were responsible to simultaneously support the air landings of XI. Fliegerkorps across large distances and, at the same time make the necessary arrangements for the Russian campaign. Therefore, from the start, Operation MERKUR had to submit to the dictates of Operation BARBAROSSA. Both the pressure of time and the fact that air-force units were being siphoned off for Operation BARBAROSSA, made it necessary to resort to improvisation.

The direct consequences of playing a double game was evident when VIII. Fliegerkorps, preparing for BARBAROSSA, only left the ground infrastructure immediately required in the Balkans and in Greece. This meant that paratroopers had to refuel their transport aircraft by hand. They also limited the stockpiling of aircraft ammunition. What later on turned out to be an absolute catastrophe, the Signal Regiment was already on its way to the assembly areas for Operation BARBAROSSA. This regiment was indispensable for the cooperation between the headquarters of 4th Luftflotte, VIII. Fliegerkorps, XI. Fliegerkorps, and the dispersed operating units on Crete. This lack of communication, as it turned out, paralyzed the leadership and caused it to grope in the dark during the critical phases of the battle. This lack of precautions to call for and insist on stable communications and radio links crippled the leadership of XI. Fliegerkorps and deprived it of the ability to influence the course of the battle.

The deployment of strong air-force elements to the Balkans and to Greece, as well as the parachute assault conducted by elements of 7th Flieger-Division at the Isthmus of Corinth on April 26, 1941, unmistakably indicated to the enemy that the German Supreme Command had decided to capture Crete. When, after April 25, 1941, XI. Fliegerkorps began to move its forces from their home bases in northern Germany across the Balkan land bridge by laborious and time-consuming rail and truck transports, the British had additional indicators of German intentions. It was possible for the well developed British intelligence network, which was left behind in Greece, to report in detail every movement of German forces to London, Cairo, and Crete. In addition, the British had succeeded in deciphering the German radio coded messages through ULTRA intelligence intercepts.

General Bernard Freyberg, Commanding general of the Allied forces on the island of Crete, had a detailed knowledge of when and where the assault was to take place. When he sighted the approaching airborne units he was said to have remarked: "They are on time".

Having lost strategic surprise, the question of how to achieve at least tactical surprise – the remaining second key to success – became the focus of all considerations. Surprise always depends on possessing as much information as possible on the strength and disposition of the enemy.

In contrast, German commanders found it difficult to obtain accurate intelligence on British forces. In spite of a bold and self-sacrificing mission, the Fliegerkorps' reconnaissance squadron failed to produce a picture of the situation that was revealing to German commanders. So, as a last resort, the squadron leaders decided to conduct very-low-altitude flights to locate the enemy positions by visual observation. All three squadron leaders were shot down without having succeeded in providing a clear picture of the opposing forces' strength, their positions, or their defensive measures. This deficiency is reflected in XI. Fliegerkorps' operations order: "The situation is hardly clarified".⁷⁷

Thus, the airborne operation to invade Crete became a mission into the unknown. In view of the makeshift solutions and a completely unclear picture of the enemy situation, the overall feasibility was under question. This question came up during a meeting, chaired and conducted by General Student, at the XI. Fliegerkorps operations center immediately before the operation was to begin on May 19, 1941.

Student and his staff tried to achieve at least tactical surprise by attacking the enemy with paratroopers at various locations at the same time.⁷⁸ Student demanded support for the air landings by the direct employment of the bombardment formations of VIII. Fliegerkorps. This request was declined by its commander, General der Flieger Freiherr von Richthofen. He justified his refusal with the argument that such support could be provided neither simultaneously nor successively at so many locations.⁷⁹ However, Student did not abandon his view that – through the paratroopers' raid-like onslaught under the cover of fighter aircraft and dive bombers leapfrogging above the assault objectives – the enemy defenses could be suppressed during the airdrop phase, thus enabling tactical surprise to be achieved.⁸⁰

Taking in account the existing factors of time and space, Student's intention would have, if implemented, resulted in bombardment formations exceeding their capabilities. This was due to navigation problems and the difficulty of finding the enemy in his excellently camouflaged defensive positions. Expected fire from the defenders and the fact that it would take approximately two hours to make the return flight from southern Greece to Crete were additional

complications. The limited number of bombers, the time required to refuel and replenish them, and the aircraft crews' need to recover, and the long distances that limited the aircraft's staying over target made leapfrogging unrealistic.

Initial mission planning – even though it may have involved a realistic calculation of time and distance, consideration of efficiency of combat aircraft formations, and coordination of different and far dispersed units – was based on wishful thinking rather than on facts. Sticking to the idea of fixing the enemy in place, by attacking him at several places at the same time, did not consider that all likely objectives might have been properly estimated and therefore would be prepared for defense.

So if the airborne units directly attacked the island's critical spots, it would hardly come as a surprise to the enemy. Thus, success greatly depended on bombardment formations being able to find and strike the enemy in his prepared and camouflaged positions. Then air landings would have to be precisely coordinated in terms of timing and drop zones, thus enabling paratroopers to directly exploit the effects of the "artillery of the air".

The enemy did not have to guess that the airfields would be the main objectives; he could be certain of that fact. Keeping that in mind, the New Zealander's General Freyberg, Commanding General on Crete, and the commanders assigned to him, regarded the three airfields as being the points of their main defensive effort. The enemy might have been taken by surprise if Student had pursued his idea of dropping paratroopers behind the defensive positions (which he rightly expected to be on the northern coast) and attacking the enemy from the rear.⁸¹

Hitler, too, had the same idea during the first meeting on January 21, 1941. For the assault he thought "that the island should be attacked by a number of individual 'parachute elements' at several locations at the same time".⁸² Indeed, the interior of the island included a number of plateaus that were suitable for such an operation.

In such an operation the enemy could only generally prepare himself for such an assault if he had wanted to prepare a strong defense of the key objectives. However, the decision to conduct the assault in an area that is only slightly defended – i.e. at one of the enemy's weak points – would also have been subordinated to seizing an airfield. Seizing airfields was an

indispensable prerequisite for this airborne operation because it would facilitate the landing of 5th Gebirgsdivision. This clearly shows that XI. Fliegerkorps could only achieve its operational effect by conducting a preliminary attack which led to a ground operation. It had to be reinforced or relieved by land forces within a very short time.⁸³ These conditions, which could hardly be changed, seem to be proof of previous assessments which emphasized that XI. Fliegerkorps would be unable to capture the island without a supporting sea-borne landing.⁸⁴ Since both Hitler and Student were unable to decide to conduct a risky attack behind enemy lines – which, of course, could have been successful only after lengthy, fierce fighting – it was impossible for the first wave to achieve tactical surprise.

In planning the mission, the leadership of XI. Fliegerkorps had already determined the assault objectives for the second wave. This predetermination of time and drop zones disregarded military lessons learned in all previous campaigns, which had shown that in most cases the enemy will upset the concept of operations, thus preventing an operation from proceeding according to plan. This is particularly true when repeating tactical procedures that have been used in prior operations.⁸⁵ Therefore, commanders must keep reserve forces to facilitate solutions, should a crisis occur, as well as to "carry through the development of what was originally the central idea in accordance with the steadily changing circumstances".⁸⁶ But the operational plan of XI. Fliegerkorps did not consider this principle. Determining both the timing and areas of employment in advance of an operation is in stark contrast to one of the German military's fundamental principles of exercising command and control: Never make fixed arrangements for the future, just plan ahead.

Moltke's leadership principle "No operational plan survives with any certainty the first encounter with the enemy" was totally disregarded.⁸⁷ For example, Moltke made the German general staff officer take notice of the fact that what matters is "that you formulate an idea in simple terms and be persistent in putting it into action, waiting for things to come".⁸⁸ If, in observing this principle, foresighted planning "keeps the actual goal in mind and sticks to it unwaveringly, regardless of the vicissitudes of events", the German military's fundamental principles of exercising command and control are then complied with.⁸⁹ The aforementioned Moltke principle, as well as another one, which says "It can never be foreseen with certainty how a battle will end, thus making it impossible to plan beyond it", were not considered as much as was required. This was obviously due to the fact that the operation had to be planned and prepared under severe time constraints.⁹⁰

All in all, it can be said that the leadership of XI. Fliegerkorps failed to observe the German military's fundamental principles of exercising command and control. In part this was because they were not able, under the pressure exerted by the circumstances at the time, to examine them for a sufficient period of time.

THE RESULT

The successful capture of Crete, which the Germans paid for with more than 3000 paratroopers killed and missing and some 1600 wounded was to say the least costly. It was a Pyrrhic victory, considering its strategic benefit and the consequences it had for the parachute arm. Even the comparison with the allied losses numbering a total of 3540 killed, some 2500 wounded and more than 11000 taken prisoner does little to change this evaluation.⁹¹ The nucleus of a modern force, which had proven its operational value especially in the Western campaign of 1940, had been destroyed in an operation that lacked strategic relevance right from the start.

With the accession of Hungary, Rumania and Slovakia to the Tripartite Pact in November 1940, the swift capture and capitulation of Yugoslavia on April 17, 1941, and the Greek surrender on April 23, 1941, the threat to the flank of the Russian campaign had been largely eliminated. Furthermore, as early as late 1941 Field Marshall Rommel had to retreat through northeastern Libya, which he had previously captured, with heavy losses. Thus, the possession of Crete as an "aircraft carrier" or a "platform" for the campaign in North Africa was hardly relevant. Crete did not prove to be what is termed today a "fleet in being" in the eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, the strategic purpose for capturing Crete seems at the very best dubious.

Hitler's almost singular attachment of to the Duce resulted in competing objectives and the detriment of his freedom of action, which was very taxing for the German Reich's overall war effort. Far too late did Hitler admit his error: In his political will of February and April 1945, he acknowledged that the Greek campaign had been "unfortunate" and that it had been an "idiotic undertaking".⁹² This admission shows that the capture of Crete, too, was a strategic error, or at least ultimately futile. The commitment in secondary theatres in the south was irresponsible in terms of politico-military and strategic principles. In contrast to other serious misjudgments of

Hitler, the decision to launch Operation MERKUR cannot be solely blamed on the "Supreme Commander". The repeated insistence by the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe, Goering, and by the Commander of the XI. Fliegerkorps, Student, to stage an airborne attack on Crete reveals grave deficits in their capability to consider over-arching politico-military aspects in their thinking. It may be that they were "drawn" into the Crete operation by the successes of the airborne arm during the Western campaign. Whatever the case, it is apparent that these leaders never possessed the qualities characteristic of a military commander and strategist, that is, to never lose sight of the primary objective.

The fact that Mussolini did not take part in the operation is an indication that Crete's importance for the Italian position in the Dodecanese was considered to be minor. It did not contribute to the improvement of the Italian Navy's freedom of action or the security of Italy's main supply routes to Africa.⁹³

Within nine months after the start of the war in 1939, the German armed forces conquered the heart of continental Europe and suffered only minor losses. The dramatic losses sustained by the paratroopers in Crete, however, were in stark contrast and were a deep shock to Hitler. During a reception held for holders of the Knight's Cross on July 19, 1941, Hitler turned to Student and said, rather in passing, "Of course, General you know that after Crete we shall never do another Airborne operation. The parachute arm is one that relies entirely on surprise. That surprise factor has now exhausted itself...the day of the Paratroopers is over".⁹⁴ Hitler had lost faith in the operational role of the airborne arm.⁹⁵ The paratroops were no longer used as an operational arm of the third dimension in large-scale operations. They were employed in many isolated missions in critical situations on all fronts. Often they were used as a last-ditch effort to save a desperate situation.

Student himself admitted that "contrary to my calculations and expectations, it had proved impossible to take any airfield in a swift assault".⁹⁶ In retrospect he observed that "it would have been better if the second wave had not been deployed on May 20th, as envisaged in the operations plan, but on the following morning". In his "Summary of the Crete Operation", he reportedly wrote, that he had made a mistake when he proposed the attack on Crete. Therefore he brought about the death of the German airborne arm, which he had created.⁹⁷

Churchill, however, achieved his primary objective in the defense of Crete, albeit with high losses. The concept of destroying the enemy's resources, an idea that dominated Churchill's thinking, enjoyed success; the "spear of the German lance", the XI. Fliegerkorps, was broken.

CONCLUSIONS

The absence of a German joint-combined General Staff and a coordinated decision-making process, which also included Germany's allies, resulted in insufficient strategic guidance and unclear military objectives for German forces. The question, whether Hitler was pushed into the Crete operation by Goering and Student, remains unclear.⁹⁸ There is a likelihood that Hitler was convinced, by the Airforce, to include Crete into the overall Balkan effort or as a stepping stone to the Near-Middle East region. All of this underlines the fact that Hitler was not a military genius.⁹⁹ There was no agreed end-state in German operations in the Mediterranean¹⁰⁰ and the Mediterranean had only a loose connection with the other ongoing operations.¹⁰¹

The German involvement in North Africa and the Mediterranean was first of all oriented towards maintaining Italy's survival as an ally and regional power in the Mediterranean. However, it was based on an incorrect appraisal of Italy's military-strategic capabilities and British intent. Although it figured into the securing of the Southern flank, the German assessment of the strategic importance of the Mediterranean and the island of Crete did not correspond with Germany's primary politico-military and strategic-operational objective, the conquest of Russia.

The strategic surprise factor, one of the fundamental prerequisites for a successful airborne operation, was absent from the outset. Conversely, the British concept of causing the enemy to waste its resources in a secondary theater, in particular its elite troops, was successful.

The deficiencies in deciding to plan and implement MERKUR have to be seen first and foremost in the decision making process which failed to consider in any logical fashion the strategic importance of Crete. The short time for planning and preparing Operation MERKUR, in particular, ensuring the necessary coordination among the various command authorities,

inevitably resulted in frictional losses and lack of intelligence. It should be recognized, however, that Operation MERKUR was a major military effort, and on the part of the parachute arm, a major individual effort.¹⁰²

The German success in taking Crete was built on the high professional skills of individual soldiers and military leaders and the knowledge of the mission down to the individual paratrooper and mountain infantryman. The will to accomplish a given mission, as well as to survive with one's comrades, was one of the driving factors for success. What in the end assisted German troops was an opponent who could, at no point, make the decision to launch a counterattack and fight the airborne operation in its early stage, despite their favorable situation and the overall superiority of forces.

The path to Operation MERKUR demonstrated a fundamental failure in German strategic leadership and therefore marks the beginning of the culminating point for the German Armed Forces in World War II.

WORD COUNT= 7,913

ENDNOTES

¹ "blutiger Opfergang". See Generaloberst Student und seine Fallschirmjaeger. Die Erinnerungen des Generaloberst Student, bearbeitet von Hermann Goetzel, Friedberg 1980, further-on addressed as Goetzel, page 234.

² The course of the battle is described in a number of books. See Bibliography.

³ Martin van Crefeld, also identifies the "most interesting question about the 'German Sprung nach Kreta' is not how it was carried out, but why." See his book: Hitler's Strategy 1940-1941, The Balkan Clue, page 166.

⁴ On November 13, 1940 Goering recommended to Hitler the creation of an airborne corps made up of the 7th Flieger Division and 22nd Airborne Division. The 7th Flieger Division would provide troops that could be deployed through parachute drops and gliders. The 22nd Infantry Division was equipped to become air transportable and renamed into an Airborne Division. Both formations had already been employed in a large scale airborne operation in Holland in 1940. There, parts of the 7th Flieger Division made the raid on Fort Eben-Emael. On December 3, 1940, Hitler approves the 22nd Airborne Division to be brought under the command of the 7th Flieger Division and the creation of the XI. Fliegerkorps; the German capacity for airborne operations was now under command of the air force. For the history of the German airborne forces see two reports on information obtained from GenO Student and others by the Great Britain Combined Detailed Interrogation Center. See also Airborne Operations: A German Appraisal by GenM Hellmuth Reinhardt and eleven others, 1957, page 11.

⁵ The losses are mentioned at page 35.

⁶ See Bibliography

⁷ When the Nazis came to power in 1933 the German Armed Forces were controlled by a Reich Defense Minister, subordinate to him were the chiefs of the army staff, and of the naval staff. A German air force did not exist due to the limitations imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. In May 1935, there was a change in the titles of these offices. The Supreme Command of the Armed Forces, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy were introduced. The army and naval staffs were renamed "High Commands"- Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH) and Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine (OKM). At about the same time, the German air force came into official existence at about this same time, but it was not put under the Reichsminister for War and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. It was an independent institution under the personal command of Goering, who had the double title of Air Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force. In February 1938 a rather fundamental reorganization took place, both in terms of personnel and organizational structure. With the retirement of the Reichsminister (von Blomberg) and the Commander-in-Chief of the Army (von Fritsch) the War Ministry was wound up. This ministry had contained a division or department called the Wehrmachtsamt or "Armed Forces Department," the function of which was to coordinate the plans and operations of the Army and Navy. From this Armed Forces Department was formed a new overall Armed Forces authority, known as the High Command of the Armed Forces Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW). As the Air Force as well as the Army and the Navy was subordinated to OKW, coordination of all Armed Forces matters was vested in the OKW, which was in effect Hitler's personal staff for these matters. It combined staff and ministerial functions. Keitel was appointed chief of the OKW. The most important department of OKW was the operations staff, of which Jodl became the chief. Jodl's immediate subordinate was Warlimont, with the title of Deputy Chief of The Armed Forces Operations Staff from 1941. In 1941, Hitler took over as Commander-in-Chief of the Army himself. OKW, OKH, OKM and the Air Force each had its own staff. There was no single German General Staff, but rather four, one for each branch of the service plus one for the OKW as the over-all inter-service supreme command. See the Nuernberg Tribunal Protocols - Internet. See also, OKW Organization, A Summary (1910-1945) by Vizeadmiral Leopold Buerkner, 1947.

⁸ The German saying "Groesster Feldherr aller Zeiten" was abbreviated "Groefatz".

⁹ This was often remarked that Hitler has said.

¹⁰ Karl Heinz Frieser, Blitzkrieg-Legende, Der Westfeldzug 1940, Muenchen 1996. In his study Frieser disproves the Blitzkrieg-legend. At pages 363 to 393 he explains reasons and responsibilities for the DUNKIRK situation

¹¹ see Answers to Questions put to General Jodl by General Alfred Jodl, 1945, Strategy prior to 1944, further-on addressed as Jodl, page 3..

¹² Jodl, page 3.

¹³ The saying 'Festlandsdegen' describes the English interest to have an ally who could act militarily at the continent; France was occupied which left Russia as the single relevant ally. See Commentaries on "The Campaign in North Africa" by Gen Nehring and "The Mediterranean War" by Fieldmarshall Kesselring by Gen d. Artillerie Walter Warlimont, 1951. page 41. See also Andreas Hillgruber, Hitlers Strategie, Politik und Kriegfuehrung 1940-1941, Frankfurt/M. 1965.

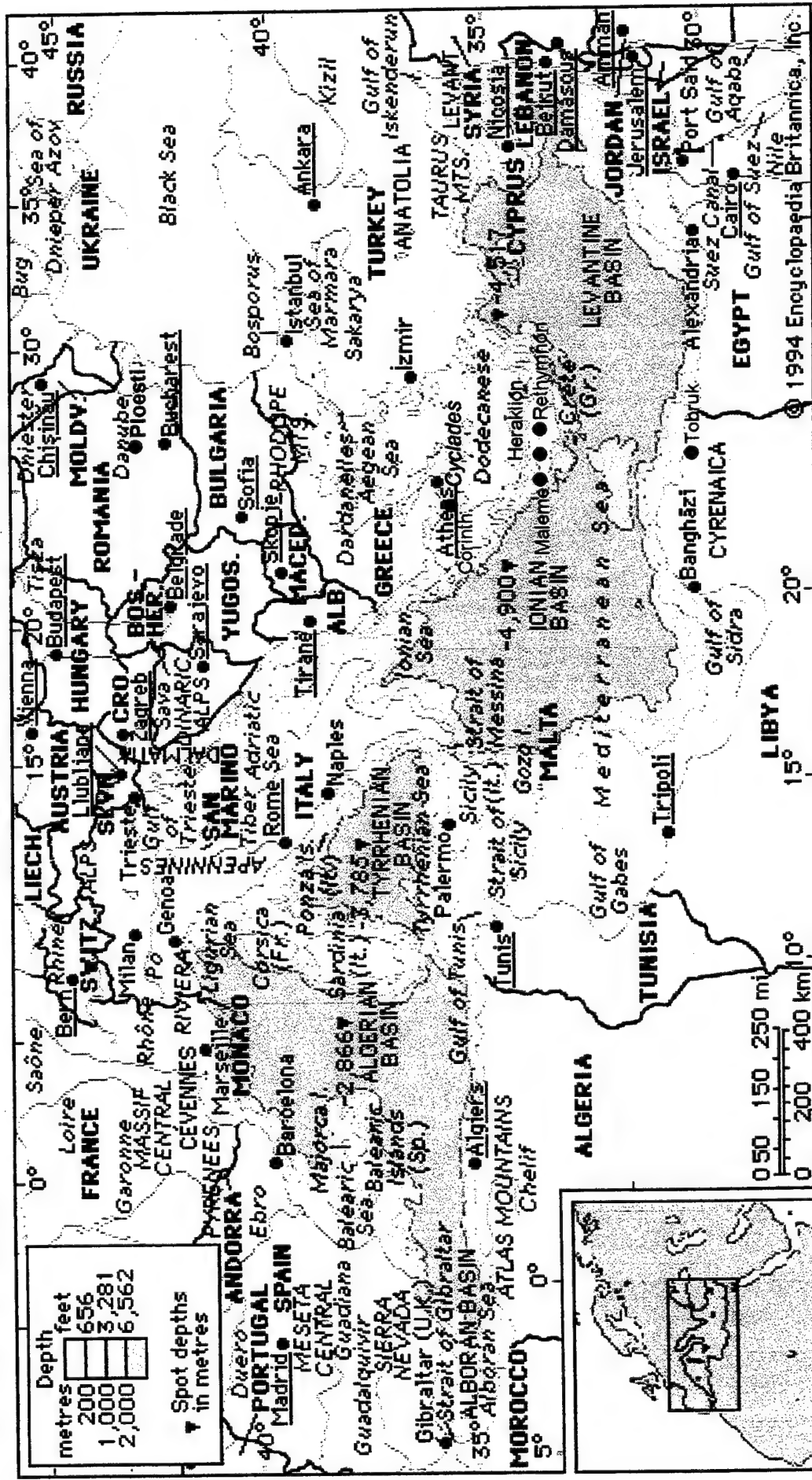
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- ¹⁴ Greiner Draft Entries, page 100.
- ¹⁵ Greiner Draft Entries, page 17.
- ¹⁶ Greiner Draft Entries, page 18.
- ¹⁷ Greiner Draft Entries, page 18.
- ¹⁸ Greiner Draft Entries, page 18.
- ¹⁹ See Preparations for the Commitment of Parachute and other Airborne Units in the Projected Invasion of Malta (Jun 42) by GenLt Gerhard Conrad, 1947, further-on addressed as Conrad, page 19.
- ²⁰ Greiner Series, Records of Situation Conferences, further-on addressed as Greiner Situation Conferences, page 9.
- ²¹ Greiner Situation Conferences page 28.
- ²² Greiner Situation Conferences page 38.
- ²³ Greiner Situation Conferences, page 52.
- ²⁴ Greiner Situation Conferences pages 68 and 73.
- ²⁵ Greiner Situation Conferences page 89.
- ²⁶ Greiner Situation Conferences pages 93 and 116.
- ²⁷ General Halder, the Chief of Staff OKW on October 25, 1940 had recorded in his diary that the dessert supply problem could never be solved without the mastery of the Mediterranean and the possession of Crete. On October 26, he wrote in his diary: 'In order to obtain conclusive results we must strike simultaneously at Crete and Egypt'. See John Hall Spencer, Battle for Crete, London, Melbourne, Toronto, 1962, pages 94 and 95.
- ²⁸ The German Campaign in Greece and Crete, 1941, by GenMj Burkhard Mueller-Hillebrand, 1952, further-on addressed as Mueller-Hillebrand, page 39..
- ²⁹ Greiner Situation Conferences page 94 and 100.
- ³⁰ Greiner Situation Conferences page 97.
- ³¹ Greiner Draft Entries page 77.
- ³² Greiner Draft Entries page 91.
- ³³ Greiner Draft Entries page 93.
- ³⁴ Greiner Draft Entries page 95.
- ³⁵ Greiner Draft Entries page 106.
- ³⁶ Greiner Draft Entries page 109.
- ³⁷ Greiner Draft Entries page 110.
- ³⁸ Greiner Draft Entries pages 120 and following.
- ³⁹ Greiner Draft Entries page 123.
- ⁴⁰ this was in fact achieved after the successful capture of Crete
- ⁴¹ Greiner Draft Entries page 146.
- ⁴² Greiner Draft Entries page 158.
- ⁴³ Greiner Draft Entries page 160.
- ⁴⁴ Greiner Draft Entries page 165.
- ⁴⁵ Greiner Draft Entries page 180.
- ⁴⁶ Greiner Draft Entries page 190.
- ⁴⁷ Greiner Draft Entries page 202.
- ⁴⁸ Greiner Draft Entries page 219.
- ⁴⁹ Greiner Draft Entries page 214.
- ⁵⁰ Greiner Draft Entries pages 243 and following.
- ⁵¹ Greiner Draft Entries page 251.
- ⁵² Greiner Draft Entries page 247.
- ⁵³ Greiner Draft Entries pages 257 and 259.
- ⁵⁴ Greiner Draft Entries page 260.
- ⁵⁵ Greiner Draft Entries page 261.
- ⁵⁶ Greiner Draft Entries page 266.
- ⁵⁷ Greiner Draft Entries page 267.
- ⁵⁸ Mueller-Hillebrand, 1952, page 41.
- ⁵⁹ Hans-Otto Muehleisen, Kreta 1941, Freiburg 1968, further-on addressed as Muehleisen, page 21.
- ⁶⁰ Goetzal page page 199.
- ⁶¹ Mueller-Hillebrand page 41.

- 62 Evaluation of German Airborne Operations by GenMj Hellmuth Reinhardt and nine others, 1953, page 69.
- 63 Goetzel page 197 and following.
- 64 Das Deutsche Reich und der zweite Weltkrieg, Bd 3, Der Mittelmeerraum und Suedosteuropa, Stuttgart 1984, Beitrag Detlef Vogel, Die Eroberung Kretas, page 488.
- 65 Capture of Corinthian Isthmus by Airborne Attack by GenLt Ruediger von Heyking, 1947, page 1.
- 66 Mueller Hillebrand page 44.
- 67 Mueller Hillebrand page 41.
- 68 Mueller-Hillebrand page 41.
- 69 Andreas Hillgruber, Hitlers Strategie, Politik und Kriegfuehrung 1940-1941, Frankfurt/M. 1965, page 467.
- 70 verify in documents
- 71 The islands close to the territorial waters of Turkey such as Rhodes, Koz, and Samos
- 72 The distance Malta to PLOESTI is less than 1500 km The distance Cyprus to PLOESTI is even less than from Malta, the route would have led over Turkey.
- 73 Muehleisen page 18.
- 74 Winston Churchill, Der Zweite Weltkrieg, Band 2, quoted in Franz Uhle-Wettler, Hoehe- und Wendepunkte deutscher Militaergeschichte, Hamburg, Berlin, Bonn 2000, page 210.
- 75 John M. Lee, The Churchill Coalition, London 1980, page 31 and following.
- 76 A translation of Directive Nr. 28 can be found in Andrew L. Zapantis' book 'Hitler's Balkan Campaign and the Invasion of the USSR', New York, 1987, pages 229 and following.
- 77 Operations order of the XI. Fliegerkorps as of May 12, 1941/War Diary - Sturmregiment H 0962 (MGFA D78A2025)
- 78 Goetzel page 199.
- 79 Goetzel page 226 and Muehleisen page 25.
- 80 Goetzel page 226.
- 81 Goetzel page 208.
- 82 Goetzel pages 199 and 208.
- 83 Goetzel pages 158-161.
- 84 Muehleisen pages 51 and following.
- 85 General Student in his 'Erinnerungen' does quote General Freyberg: "Die Schwaechе jedes Angriffs ist die Wiederholung eines bereits angewendeten Verfahrens" (the weakness of every attack is the repetition of an procedure which was already employed once), see Goetzel, page 25.
- 86 Helmuth von Moltke, Moltkes Militaerisches Werk, further-on addressed as Moltke, pages 172.
- 87 Moltke page 292 and following.
- 88 Truppenfuehrung (Army Doctrin) HDv 100/1, Oktober 1962, page 47
- 89 Moltke pages 292 and following.
- 90 Moltke pages 19 and following.
- 91 The numbers differ dependent on which side reports, the numbers included are an average which can be drawn from different sources. However, the exact numbers do not really matter, it is the cost-benefit balance which counts.
- 92 Hitlers politisches Testament, Die Bormann-Diktate vom Februar and April 1945, edited by Walter Hubatsch, Frankfurt 1962, page 79.
- 93 The detachment of two torpedo boats to protect the German sea-borne assault forces for Crete, the LUPO and the SAGITTARIO, shows Italy's powerlessness in the Mediterranean.
- 94 Goetzel page 337.
- 95 Great Britain Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Center, History of the German airborne forces, 1945, page 22.
- 96 John Hall Spencer, Battle for Crete, London 1962, page 189.
- 97 This is something I cannot prove. I know that Student's confession circulates among German paratroopers still to date.
- 98 Greece, Crete, Russia by GenArt Walter Warlimont, Answers to a Questionnaire, 1946, page 2.
- 99 Samuel J. Newland, Hitler as a Military Leader, A Clausewitzian View.
- 100 Concluding Remarks on the Mediterranean Campaign by GenFeldmarshall Albert Kesselring, 1948, further-on addressed as Kesselring, page 15.

¹⁰¹ Kesselring page 16.

¹⁰² Mueller-Hillebrand page 65.

Attachment to
Operation MERKUR – A Failure in Strategic Leadership
The Mediterranean



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